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AUTHOR	Ediger, Marlow
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ABSTRACT

This paper considers the Initial Teaching Alphabet (ITA), long out of use in the United States. It was developed by Sir James Pittman in England in 1959 as a plan of reading instruction with a simplified phoneme-grapheme correspondence that stressed consistency between symbol and sound. The paper lists the advantages and disadvantages of the ITA and provides some historical background on its use through the "Early to Read" series (7 books) produced by the Initial Teaching Alphabet Publication Company. It also explains how ITA works and presents some vowel sound illustrations. The paper discusses what was missing in ITA and sheds some light on what graduate students in language arts education thought of ITA when they used it for a classroom exercise between 1966-76. (NKA)

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Whatever Happened to the Initial Teaching Alphabet?

by Marlow Ediger

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WHATEVER HAPPENED TO THE INITIAL TEACHING ALPHABET?

I sat in on an interesting session at the 1999 International Reading Association Convention in San Diego, California in which the speaker mentioned that teachers need to weed out what is no longer useful. I agree with that statement 100 per cent. He used an example of the Initial Teaching Alphabet (ITA), as a leading candidate, for the weeding out procedure. The ITA has not been written about in educational journals for at least fifteen years, nor has ITA been mentioned as a topic for discussion at teacher education conventions involving reading and the language arts, for that same length of time.

The ITA, developed by Sir James Pittman had its beginning and use in England in 1959, and shortly thereafter in the United States. I became a university professor in the 1962-1963 school year. I used a textbook (See Tiedt and Tiedt, 1975, p.33) in my graduate language arts in the elementary school course which contained content on ITA. I was fascinated with the many practical teaching suggestions in this text, as well as with the few pages devoted to ITA. ITA was presented as an example of a plan of reading instruction with a simplified phoneme-grapheme correspondence in stressing consistency between symbol and sound.

I had a student in my graduate class who was influenced by the merits of ITA. Later on when he became Assistant Superintendent of Schools at Arnold, Missouri, near St. Louis, the ITA system of reading instruction was used on the first grade level. He sent literature on their use of ITA and its quality influence on pupils in learning to read.

The Bullock Report of 1975, in Britain, published by the Department of Education and Science, stated the following:

There is no evidence whatsoever for the belief that the best way to learn to read in traditional orthography is to learn to read in traditional orthography. It would appear that the best way to learn to read in traditional orthography is to learn to read in the Initial Teaching Alphabet (Downing, 1976, 380). In this same report, it indicated that pupils exhibited a higher quality of writing in ITA, as compared with that of pupils using traditional orthography.

Shepherd and Ragan (1982, 228) listed comparisons of ITA with traditional symbols in having pupils learn to read and write; the advantages of ITA use were the following;

1. the new letters (symbols) regularize the sound-symbol relationship of reading and writing.

2. phonetic generalizations are consistent.
3. children write with a higher quality.

Disadvantages included the following:
1. the transition to traditional orthography may be difficult.
2. adults may be unable to read the ITA...

At educational conventions, speeches were given on the pros and cons of the ITA, during the 1960s and 1970s. Articles were written in educational journals on the advantages and disadvantages of using ITA for beginning reading instruction. One research study found the following results from the Fremont United School district in California (Howden, 1966, 21-22):

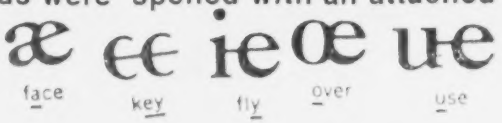
Advantages were first grade pupils could write creatively using ITA symbols by the middle of the first grade; interest in learning to read was high with less repetition needed due to the ITA vocabulary being similar to that being used daily by the child; the pupil could read most words in ITA due to its consistency between symbol and sound; and parents tended to be satisfied with ITA approaches in reading instruction.

Disadvantages included difficulties in pupils making the transition from ITA to traditional means of spelling and reading words; the ITA program was expensive since new materials had to be purchased which were not state adopted; and substitute teachers did not know how to teach using ITA.

What Comprised the ITA as a Program of Teaching Reading?

The Initial Teaching Alphabet Publication Company was the producer and seller of ITA reading materials. The Early to Read series was made up of seven books. The last book assisted pupils in making the transition from ITA to traditional means of spelling and reading words. ITA emphasized forty -four symbols which represented forty-four different sounds. However, both the letters "c" and "k" were in these 44 symbols, making exactly the same sound. The following letters, basically, had the same shape in ITA as compared to traditional methods of spelling---b, c, d, f, g, h, j, k, l, m, n, p, r, s, t, v, w, y, and z. Each of these letters made consistent sounds --- the letter "c" always stood for the hard "c" sound, such in in "cat." The letter "s" always represented the consistent sound of "s" as in the following initial consonants: center, centigrade, central, and cent. The attempt here was to always be consistent between symbol and sound, even though the following words begin with the letter "c," but in ITA were spelled with the "s" symbol: civil, census, and centipede. The letter "g" in ITA always was written for the hard 'g" sound such as in go, gone, gable, goes, and gather. The letter "j" in ITA was written for the beginning consonant

sound of the following words--- gem, George, geode, geography, and gentle, as well as for the "j" initial consonant sounds in traditional spelling such as in the following words-- jug, junior, jade, jam, and jello. All long vowel sounds were spelled with an attached letter "e", such as in the following:



Short vowel sounds basically were the same in ITA and traditional writing. Whereas, the following were particularly unique ITA symbols:

So much for a brief review of ITA symbols for pupils to learn in writing and reading as well as to make the appropriate related sounds. What did ITA attempt to achieve with their 44 symbols which were to represent 44 different sounds?

1. consistency between symbol and sound was the major goal in helping pupils to learn to read earlier and have more security with these phonics principles when reading content.
2. one symbol per sound was stressed. This consistency did away with silent letters, two or three letters representing one sound, and the few vowel letters in traditional spelling which had so many different pronunciations, including the short and long vowel sounds. There was no difference between upper and lower case letters in ITA.
3. pupils realizing in beginning reading that sound/symbol relationships are there when reading in ITA. Rapid progress in reading is then possible once the consistent ITA code has been broken.
4. confusion over sound/symbol relationships can be minimized when ITA is used instead of traditional graphemes.
5. library books in ITA were available to reinforce skills in reading.
6. pupils in remedial reading might benefit from the consistencies found in ITA between symbol and sound (Ediger, 1999, 41-45).

What was missing in ITA?

1. the major item was the transition from ITA to traditional spelling of words. There are numerous ITA symbols that are quite different from traditional graphemes. There also are many consistencies between the two sets of symbols or graphemes.
2. difficulties in finding symbols to represent sounds in ITA. For example, there are many words that pattern in sound with the common word "air," and yet this word in ITA is spelled with a long initial vowel sound . There already are 44 symbols for 44 separate matching sounds. This can be compared with the 26 letters in the English

alphabet. Even here, three letters are not needed, such as the letters "q," "x," and "c." Thus, the letters "kw" could be used instead of "qu," "eks" in place of "x," and "s" or "k" rather than "c." ITA uses these unique substitutions

3. learning becomes complex for the pupil when acquiring a specific set of ITA symbols for grade one and a somewhat different set for grade two when the transition is to be made.

4. no set of symbols will be consistent for the English speaking world due to various dialects spoken in different regions of the United States and abroad.

5. pronunciations change over the years and learning a new set of symbols which become accepted may again need to be changed since the English language is dynamic and subject to continuous modification in time and place.

6. meticulous eye/hand coordination is needed by young pupils in order to be able to write with the use of ITA. Thus, there are many geometric figures with its lines and curves in ITA writing (See Ediger (1997, 139-142).

7. reform in the traditional spelling of English words had been recommended by many well known individuals, such as President Theodore Roosevelt in 1907 and the English playwright George Bernard Shaw in the 1930s. The latter believed books could be shortened by one-third of their length if the silent letters, among other inconsistencies, were omitted, in their writing. It would be very difficult for any person to learn a new spelling code for words which would be highly or completely phonetic. For example, notice the resistance to accepting the metric system of measurement in the United States which is accepted all over the world and is much easier than the traditional English system!

Somewhat closely related to ITA was a linguistic approach in reading instruction emphasized by Leonard Bloomfield and Charles Fries, also in the 1960s. Both linguists emphasized the use of traditional symbols in reading and writing of English content. A patterns procedures was stressed here in that pupils in the classroom setting should notice not individual sound/symbol relationships per se, but rather structure in words and sentences.

Thus, for initial reading instruction, pupils with teacher assistance would read content, for example, pertaining to patterns in words as well as sentences. A consistent pattern of words might be the "can family." There are numerous words which pattern with "can." These include the following---ban, Dan, fan, Jan, man, Nan, pan, ran, tan, and van. Even with this many patterned words, it is difficult to write meaningful sentences. Somewhat meaningful sentences might be the following:

1. man can fan.
2. Tan Jan ran.

Generally, in beginning reading, linguists would add common articles such as the following: a, and, the. irregular patterned words might also be stressed for more meaning to accrue, such as in the following sentence: Dan rode a tan van. In sequence with patterned approaches in reading and writing, pupils experienced more of inconsistencies with grapheme/phoneme relationships (See Tiedt, 1983, 262-264).

What did Graduate Students think of ITA?

I kept careful classroom notes of what my graduate students thought of ITA when teaching my class in language arts in the elementary school, during the summers of 1966-1976. These students basically were full time classroom teachers during the regular school year. Many admired Sir James Pittman for thinking about the inconsistencies in traditional grapheme/phoneme relationships. Here was a person determined to do something about the lack of this consistency which did cause pupils problems in learning to read. But my graduate students realized grave problems which had to be faced by first graders when changing from ITA to traditional spelling of words.

When viewing ITA for the first time, my graduate students were skeptical abut studying another alphabet system when so much needed to be known but traditional grapheme/phoneme relationships in reading and spelling. But, many pointed out the problems involved with the traditional 26 letters of the alphabet with inconsistent spellings. One student pinpointed how the following were pronounced differently, but there was consistency in spelling the "ough" ending-- bough, cough, brought, through, and rough. When viewing the word "through," several students indicated how many words have the "ough" sound in the above named words, but the spellings are completely different. Seventeen different words were brainstormed here, including the following: to, too, two, blue, flew, and, rheumatism, among others (Ediger, 1996,221-225).

In class, we started writing words in ITA, with the symbols and their individual sounds connected and in front of each student, there was much interest and enthusiasm for their use. It appeared as if there was a game involved to see how selected words would be spelled differently as compared to traditional spelling. Words in traditional spelling that were consistently spelled caused no problems in translating to ITA. But, those words inconsistency spelled took time to translate from traditional to ITA spelling.

Was a lesson on teaching abut ITA a game only for my graduate students? No, it wasn't. From a few skeptics at the beginning of the two

hour lesson, students told me they were not aware of many minor inconsistencies in traditional spelling . For example, the following words, some believed initially, were spelled consistently--- his, dog, spoon, girl, window, air, when, the "ing" endings in words such as running, oil, beet, and egg. These are commonly used words in writing activities. As teachers, we take many things for granted since we tend to read and spell very fluently. I must say this about the multiple choice part of the test at the end of the course that the correct responses to ITA items were high indeed! I pondered over the following reasons for this occurrence:

1. was the ITA so novel that students developed interest in novelty?
2. was purpose high in studying ITA with rather consistent grapheme/phoneme relationships due to the selected inconsistencies between symbol and sound in traditional spelling of English words? The inconsistencies were not of interest initially to selected graduate students. I believe these teachers felt inconsistencies had to be lived with in the teaching of reading and spelling with the only alphabet system used in the United States.
3. were students fascinated in realizing that numerous words teachers held to be consistently spelled do have their minor or very minor inconsistencies?
4. did my students feel that there was a better understanding of the many complexities involved in attempting to change traditional approaches in spelling words?
5. were students convinced that it is time to get on with it, since these inconsistencies will be with us in reading instruction as well as in spelling?

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